Stanley Kubrick and the American Myth

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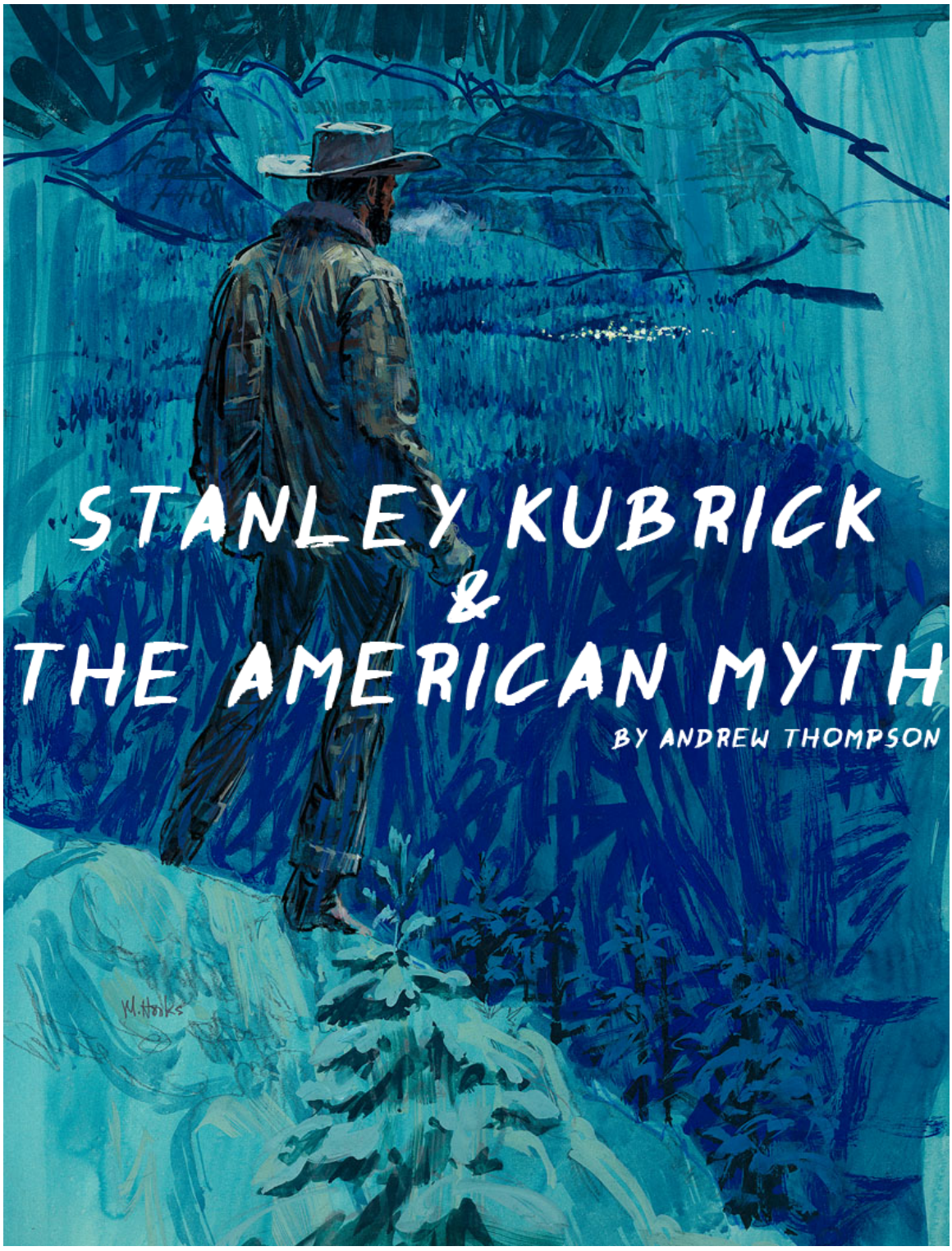
STANLEY KUBRICK
&
THE AMERICAN MYTH
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American Myth and Stanley Kubrick's War Films

Introduction

I. Kubrick's America

AUTERISM is a critical theory that gained traction just before Stanley Kubrick entered the world of cinema. The theory, particularly as understood by the French New Wave, presents the director as an author - one carrying a style and a group of ideas through his body of work (Sarris, 27). Kubrick has a few fascinations that recur through his filmography – the tension between creator and created, man's self-destructive tendencies, skepticism of institutions and authorities. Kubrick's content was a reaction to what he saw as a world run amok. His ideas were not necessarily popular; his films punch holes through society's more idealistic concepts. This is the mark of a true auteur – there is nothing too studio-friendly about Kubrick's content, but with intelligence and craft he expressed a unique voice.

In earlier centuries, wars were gruesome, but relatively small in scale compared to the tens of millions killed in the world wars of the 20th century. A bomb the size of a Volkswagen Beetle leveled an entire Japanese city in 1945. Two adversarial superpowers spent decades betting one another to annihilate the earth. The 20th century was the American century, and it was a bloody century indeed. Under America's tutelage progress accelerated to a breakneck speed – with mixed results. In a relatively short period of time, advances in industry enabled everyone to have more, communicate more easily and live longer. The same industry also produced all the bullets, bombs, tanks,

ships and planes that enabled American military superiority – and an untold sum of deaths.

Kubrick's films subvert the American Myth: the job that pays for the house with the white fence, dog, two cars, 1.8 children and a timeshare. The same job also finances the government's nuclear armament and sends thousands of young Americans to fight frivolous wars.

The American Myth is extraordinarily multifaceted, but also clear cut. John Ford's Cavalry Trilogy always includes the brave Union cavalry riding to the rescue of distressed frontier dwellers, as in *Stagecoach* (1939). Good guys win. Bad guys lose. John Wayne always rides into another sunset. Americans like straight shooters. Anyone in America can be a millionaire. America stands for justice, peace, and equality. Any American child can grow up to be the President. There are as many American folk mottos as there are examples. Films happen to be very obvious candidates as mythmakers and preservers. The extraordinary power of the medium has been harnessed for good and bad throughout its short history. The development and subsequent explosion in popularity of motion pictures tracked closely to the rise of America as an international power. The American identity is as much defined on the screen as in print. Films educate the American people about who they are and act as ambassadors to the American idea abroad.

II. Introducing Myth

MYTH is a curious thing. Every culture seems to have a few. Where do they come from? Who propagates and perpetuates myth? Why are antiquated ideas not only persistent, but indeed endemic and central to national identities?

The French cook the best food. Germans engineer the best machines. Italians are dreamers. The English are orderly. These are broad generalizations, but reflect a folk knowledge, a place where myths live. Americans are all these things and many other constructions. America's identity is a complex composite of adopted concepts and homegrown ideas. The United States was founded on a massive, unsettled landscape. In addition to the rugged terrain, the Native Americans posed an additional challenge to the encroaching Europeans. A fierce independent streak runs through the American idea, born of early challenges to simply survive in the wilderness. Look no further than Ford's *Stagecoach* for a cross-section of white society surviving a journey deeper into the wild, threatened by "savage" Indians.

American freedom is an ideal hard won on the field of battle. As long as there were men willing to march for representation, there have been the favorite sons happy to lead them. The cult of celebrity so celebrated in modern America has its roots in the newsmakers of a bygone era: the generals and statesmen who designed an ever-larger nation by means of bayonet, musket and cannon. News ink, promotions and prestige were bought with toughly won high grounds, strategic positions, flanking actions – poorer men's blood.

The American Revolution and the Great War bookend a period of American inwardness. The American Civil War confirmed Americans (or at least potent political forces) wanted to participate in a federal nation working toward pan-American goals, the United States was to be more cohesive than a loose collection of neighboring states. The Union reassembled, the country charged into the industrial revolution. Diplomatically, the United States had little ambition beyond its own sphere in North America.

America had no "American Identity" because the country was both too young and heterogeneous to support a mythological origin. The industrial revolution introduced a widely available American consumption-driven lifestyle, which was successfully marketed to the Old World. The country's commercial triumphs drove more people to American shores. Enterprising individuals eager to spread the gospel of American life portrayed their vision on celluloid, first to educate new arrivals, then to inform the world.

The Great War demonstrated the awesome power for homicide gleaned from the recent technological revolution. The First World War was an ugly affair, fought entirely between well-fortified lines; victories were often measured in yards. It was a war of firsts – the first large scale use of automatic weapons, mustard gas, tanks, and a slew of new artillery shells all designed to inflict massive casualties. America's first foray into large-scale, conventional war planted the president, Woodrow Wilson, at the heart of the conversation regarding the creation of an international diplomatic body. The industrial "sleeping giant" rose proudly from slumber in the post-WWI period, only to be drowsed again by errors of moneymen rabid for more consumption in 1920s.

Stagnation set in over the western world with the Great Depression. Hardworking Americans found decades of scrimping and saving yielded nothing. Thousands of banks failed. The catastrophe was worse in Germany where the war debt and excessively punitive terms from the Treaty of Versailles drove inflation to comical proportions. An ideologue came to power while the other major western powers were occupied with their own domestic crisis. While the Nazis stormed borders east and west, the Japanese launched an attack "that shall live in infamy." Americans returned to Italy and France only decades after their elders' flight. Having defeated the Nazis and vaporized the Japanese, America emerged the unequivocal economic and military power.

The American model was tested only by the Soviet Union in a heated Cold War; the cultural imperative to glorify American life was never greater. As the fifties turned to the sixties, American consumption became unprecedentedly conspicuous. The government threw money at the defense industry praying to outwit Soviet missiles or land on the moon, whichever would rankle the temper of their communist menace. American planes, tanks, troops and businesses stormed new territories preaching a second Manifest Destiny – to install American-style capitalism and government wherever it could find fertile ground. America was going on offense: to Vietnam, or the Moon.

This political, economic and cultural assertion was finally rebuked in Vietnam – the first foe who did not fold to superior American technology. America did not know how to manage an insurgency. Earlier wars liberated local non-combatants – the Vietnamese attitude was much more ambiguous than the French following D-Day. American commanders were perfectly competent Western military strategists, but had

little sense how to root out an enemy on its home turf. An enemy that dug in, employed guerilla tactics, blended with the populace, and launched attacks from neighboring countries. Vietnam was the first American quagmire; recent forays into the Middle East have confirmed Vietnam was not the last.

III. Kubrick at War

In an interview with Film Quarterly in 1959, Kubrick intimated "one of the attractions of a war or crime story is that it provides an almost unique opportunity to contrast an individual of our contemporary society with a solid framework of accepted value … which can be used as a counterpoint to a human, individual, emotional situation" (Young, 6). This idea manifests itself in all Kubrick's war films: a protagonist testing, subverting, or defeating myth.

Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) uses the plight of three condemned infantrymen of the French army to assail a general's willingness to trade glory for humanity. *Paths of Glory* is set in World War I, but was released when Cold War hysteria led the United States government to produce one nuclear warhead nearly every day, amassing 18,000 bombs by the end of 1960.[1] The director's choice to use the French army as the backdrop for his drama was essential in the American political climate of the mid fifties. Notably, the dialogue in the film is entirely English and delivered without any hint of accent. In the final scene of *Paths of Glory*, a young woman sings "Faithful Hussar" in German, heightening the lack of any French in the rest of the film. The names of all the characters are suitable for French characters, but are also palatable to American ears. *Paths of Glory*

[1] Natural Resources Defense Council, Archive of Nuclear Data 1945-2002, http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab9.asp

is as much about Americans as it is about the French. Criticism of American warmongering has been central to Kubrick's oeuvre since his first films.

The combined 76 million deaths resulting from the first two world wars could be dwarfed in a matter of minutes by the power of massive nuclear war. However, the death toll of the first half of the 20th century did not dissuade the remaining powers from mass-producing nuclear weapons. Calling World War One and the Vietnam War "senseless," Kubrick was more worried that "for the first time in history, man has the means to destroy the entire species – and possibly the planet as well" (Nordern, 68). Kubrick became very interested in the possibility of nuclear war between the United States and the USSR in the late fifties (Maland, 702). He had a comprehensive understanding of the technology and systems employed by each player, different nuclear war scenarios and estimated casualty rates – so-called 'nuclear strategy.' Between radiation pills and fallout shelters, the American public was relatively convinced nuclear war was an eventuality and would be addressed with a consumer solution. Kubrick decided to make a film on the nuclear problem, first securing the rights to a novel called *Red Alert* by Peter George. Using *Red Alert*'s premises of an accidental nuclear war, Kubrick constructed *Dr Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb* (1964). *Dr. Strangelove* directly satirizes American hysteria, mainly through General Jack Ripper (Sterling Hayden) and General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott). *Dr. Strangelove* demonstrates man's unfettered pursuit of a more efficient way to end the world.

Stanley Kubrick's final war film, *Full Metal Jacket* (1984), is also the director's most potent assault on American Myth. The first half of the film involves a painstakingly

accurate account of Marine training on Parris Island, off the coast of South Carolina. Through the eyes of Pvt. Joker (Matthew Modine), Kubrick breaks down eighteen year old boys into "men without fear". The second half of *Full Metal Jacket* paints Vietnam as a new American frontier, replete with American cowboys and hostile natives. *Full Metal Jacket* questions Hollywood's role in portraying war as an adventure, with particularly strong jabs toward John Wayne. The film is a full frontal assault on American activism abroad and the folks at home complicit with such policies.

Paths of Glory, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Full Metal Jacket* trace an underlying thesis in Stanley Kubrick's work – American life is not egalitarian haven it proselytizes abroad. The myth is that America is a just society, essentially egalitarian, where freedom means valuing the individual, even when libertarianism is inconvenient or difficult. The truth is a much darker reality. America engaged in wars without cause, sacrificing the lives of thousands of men and women – Americans, enemies, and innocent civilians. The "Defense" Department has probably caused much of the strife it is charged to defend against. In George Washington's farewell address as the President of the United States, he questioned why an America without neighboring rivals would ever "quit our own to stand upon foreign ground?" He had little concept of the scale war would take on one hundred fifty years after his address. Washington hated war fought with cannons and single-shot muskets, he would have trembled at automatic guns and city-clearing bombs. America not only partook in war during the 20th century, it made a mastery of it, reinventing it in ever more deadly forms.

Chapter I: *Paths of Glory*

KUBRICK read Humphrey Cobb's novel, *Paths of Glory*, while in high school. The director discovered the book in his father's office and read it on a whim. With financing from his partners, Kubrick approached Cobb's widow and secured the screen rights for $10,000. Unsurprisingly, none of the major studios wanted anything to do with *Paths of Glory*. Kubrick eventually found a champion in Kirk Douglas, who took interest in the Col. Dax role. With a bankable star attached, *Paths of Glory* moved forward with United Artists – the only Hollywood studio without major financial interests in France.

Baited with the promise of a promotion, General Mireau (George Macready) orders an impossible attack on an impregnable German position known as the Anthill. When a third of the men refuse to leave the trenches, Mireau orders French artillery to fire on the balking troops. The artillery battery commander refuses the order and the attack on the Anthill fails. Furious, Mireau tells Col. Dax to arrest one man from each company (three in all) to stand trial for cowardice in the face of the enemy. Two of the accused left the trenches and advanced until the whole regiment retreated. The other condemned man was unconscious during the attack, due to a blow to the head. The court martial is a perfunctory formality and all three men are sentenced to die. Col. Dax approaches Gen. Mireau's superior, General Broulard (Adolphe Menjou), attempting to leverage Mireau's misstep with the artillery to save the men's lives. Broulard misunderstands, believing Dax is angling for a promotion. The convicted men face a firing squad, Mireau is shamed, and Dax returns to his regiment dejected. Kubrick leaves the audience (and the regiment) with a parting melody, sung by a German girl in a café.

The war rattles on and many of the faces in the café will soon belong to dead men – the café isn't a salvation, only a momentary reprieve.

At its core, *Paths of Glory* is a film about ambition trumping humanity. Kubrick shapes this theme with several command-control relationships and some very suggestive cinematography. The principal motif is a disconnect between the men on the front lines - in the trenches, dirt and blood struggling to survive - and the men ordering them to their deaths. Kubrick uses the chateau, Gen. Mireau's headquarters, to illustrate the tension between ephemeral (life) and everlasting (glory).

The film opens with a voiceover recounting the outbreak of World War I and the subsequent development of the front between France and Germany. As the camera pans left, a car approaches a column of infantrymen standing at attention outside the chateau's gate. Gen. Broulard alights and walks inside. The chateau is a building protected by infantrymen, but it is as impregnable as the Anthill – a clubhouse for the elite, those within reach of glory.

Kubrick cuts to Gen. Mireau's office: a massive drawing room, stuffed with ornate vestiges of the aristocracy. Mireau's right hand, Major Saint-Auban, acts as a butler: he announces Gen. Broulard, silently takes the general's coat and exits. In the first two shots, Kubrick manages to create a hierarchy – infantry outside, the Major above them, Mireau and Broulard above the Major. Even Broulard, Mireau's superior, marvels at the opulence of Mireau's accommodations, "It's grand, very grand … I wish I had your taste in carpets and pictures." The pictures are of particular interest, insinuating the

"scope of history and art" that hang on the chateau's walls (Nelson, 128). The drawing room is a place of permanence, where only the best men can aspire to be immortalized.

Broulard moves from truthful flattery straight to business. He lauds Mireau's tenacity and asks him if he can take the Anthill. Mireau initially refuses; the position is too much for his battered troops:

> "I'm responsible for the lives of eight thousand men. What is my ambition against that? What is my reputation in comparison to that? My men come first of all, George, and those men know it, too. Those men know that I would never let them down. The life of one of those soldiers means more to me than all the stars and decorations and honors in France."

Broulard then subtly goads Mireau, assuring him there are no hard feelings if the task is simply out of the question. Mireau's pride swells, he begins rationalizing the potential for success with artillery and reserve troops. Finally, he convinces himself, "We just might do it!" For all his speech about loyalty, Mireau hardly lets his words leave his mouth before he is swayed to make an attempt on the Anthill.

Kubrick cuts to an awestruck sentry examining the Anthill from a peephole in the French trench, drawing the tension between a knowledgeable infantryman and an aspiring general. Mireau begins a tour of the trench, approaching a few men asking "ready to kill more Germans?" One of the general's interviewees has psychologically cracked under his experience on the front, but Mireau insists "there is no such thing as shell shock." Mireau hits the soldier and demands the "coward" be transferred out of his regiment. The major pipes in, assuring the general his presence in the trench has "an incalculable effect upon

the morale." Both of them are isolated in the chateau and occasionally "tour" the front, but they do not belong there, they are merely sightseeing.

Ironically, Mireau's conversation with Colonel Dax begins with the general remarking that he "can't understand these armchair officers trying to fight a war from behind a desk waving papers at the enemy worrying about whether a mouse is going to run up their pants leg." Dax, ever the humanist, retorts that he'd chose the mice over Mausers (German guns) every time.

Mireau examines the Anthill through a periscope, almost comically understating how he's seen tougher objectives, calling it "pregnable". Dax finds the general's choice of words complicated, musing an attack on the Anthill has "something to do with giving birth." In the trench, the fleeting nature of life is very real. Dax has a sense of this, having seen so many men die, but Mireau and the major have no concept of "the paradox of birth and death" (Nelson, 127). The scene seethes with irony. The major nearly jumps out of his own skin when a few shells fall near the trench.

Back in Dax's quarters, the general, major and colonel briefly discuss recent casualties. Mireau declares the troops are stupid and the major thinks they respond to a herd instinct by grouping together when shells start falling. Bewildered, Dax thinks the tendency to stick together is "a human sort of thing."

Mireau tells Dax the regiment will take the Anthill, but admits the attack will result in more than half the men dying. The general covers by emoting the mission is for France. Dax scoffs, quoting Samuel Johnson: "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Dax's resistance surprises Mireau; the general contends the colonel is tired

and needs a long furlough. Grimacing, Dax takes the assignment, if only to avoid separation from his men when they need him most.

Lieutenant Roget (Wayne Morris) and his subordinate, Corporal Paris (Ralph Meeker), mirror the dynamic of the Mireau-Dax relationship. Roget is a coward and drunk, moreover he refuses to let his men imbibe. On a night patrol, Roget gets spooked and kills one of his men out of recklessness. Paris threatens to report his actions to Dax, but Roget lords his rank over Paris. Later in the film, Roget chooses Paris to stand trial for the company's cowardice.

The morning of the attack, Gen. Mireau surveys the field from a telescope far from the action. He offers some of the officers a cognac, first taking some himself and toasts "To France!" The scene is nearly the same as the briefing Lt. Roget gives to his subordinates before their patrol, the connection made explicit through the repetition of a tippling superior. From the safety of Mireau's observation post, Kubrick immediately cuts to a very long dolly shot of Dax walking the length of the trench while the men huddle against the walls, the French bombardment is exploding all around. Mireau is precisely the armchair officer he purports to loath.

After the troops retreat, Dax is summoned to a meeting with Mireau and Broulard at the chateau. As the three officers approach Mireau's office, several men carry a large painting in the background. Whether the picture is emerging from storage or heading to it is unknown, the immortalized moment is either being remembered or forgotten. Paintings, medals and statues can protract a man's life, but apparently even glory fades.

Inside the drawing room, Mireau is furious. Dax attempts to quell him by reminding him of the 701st regiment's previous heroism. The general responds, "we're not talking about the past, we're talking about the present." For Mireau, history is strictly the province of generals – the past efforts of infantrymen are not worth talking about, they will not merit a mention in history books. Men are expendable, to find out if an attack is truly impossible, the only proof "would be their dead bodies lying at the bottom of the trenches." Casualties are an ugly reality in war, but Mireau would sacrifice every last one of his men to test a German position. Dax offers himself to be made example of instead of the infantry, but Broulard will not hear it, "this is not a question of officers!" Broulard acts as though officers are chess players; if one does poorly, he simply resets the board and plays again. Mireau finally "settles" on three men, far short of the original body count he had in mind (100).

During the court martial, Gen. Mireau lounges on a couch, while all other spectators sit in chairs. He observes the proceedings with feigned seriousness, only asking Dax if he "questions the authenticity of [the] court." Dax retaliates that the case is "a mockery of all human justice." The court martial adjourns to deliberate.

In the evening, Broulard hosts a party of generals and politicians, but is briefly interrupted by Dax. The colonel lobbies for the three condemned soldiers; Broulard laments he can do nothing. The attack was politically, not militarily, motivated. The general will not risk his reputation to save a few grunts, asking, "Why should we have to bear any more criticism for the failure than we have to?" Broulard perversely tries to cast the executions in a good light, boasting they "will be a perfect tonic for the entire

division." He cheapens the fighting men: "the troops are like children … troops crave discipline."

The executions proceed and the generals retreat to the chateau for lunch. Mireau and Broulard giddily recount the "splendor" of the event. Broulard claims he has never seen an execution "handled any better." Mireau delivers perhaps the most heartless line in the film, "the men died wonderfully" and thanks his stars nothing happened that "will leave everyone with a bad taste". Kubrick has masterfully drawn out the audience's growing disgust with the general staff and builds it to a crescendo with the final scene in the drawing room. Finally, Dax enters and Mireau faces his colonel's accusations. Mireau spouts lies; incredulous Broulard would even ask him if the charges were true. He saves the most preposterous fiction for last, "The man you stabbed in the back is a soldier."

Mireau is no soldier. He is slimy as the worst sort of politician; only he deals in men's lives instead of votes. Mireau is ultimately as much a pawn as any of the lowest ranking privates among Dax's men. His victories serve Broulard in the good times and his failures make him the scapegoat when political pressures demand tangible results. Broulard attempts to recruit Dax to Mireau's post, but the colonel finds the offer repulsive. Dax calls Broulard a "sadistic old man" and leaves the chateau to find his men.

Kubrick saves the final café scene to further contrast the officers from the fighting men. The café's owner presents a young, scared German girl to the crowded room of soldiers. The men hoot and whistle, admonishing her good looks while simultaneously terrifying her. Yet as she sings "The Faithful Hussar", their cheers fade and they sit in silence. Stunned, both by the beauty and fragility of the girl and the swell of compassion

they feel – she is not a German, but a woman. The whole affair has been catastrophic misunderstanding. The war has never been in the interest of the men on the front lines, killing and dying for neatly dressed generals lounging in chateaus.

This is *Paths of Glory*'s most devastating scene. In a single moment, a frightened girl undoes all the pageantry and patriotism of war. There is no glory in war, only fratricide. The enemy, which the army is drilled to hate, is likely a neighbor. The German loves and values the same things as the Frenchman. The men in trenches, with shoddy rifles and dirty overcoats, have no quarrel with one another. They stand to gain nothing and lose everything. The common man has no business in war, but he does all the fighting. With the café scene, Kubrick lays bare this ugly truth and exposes the myth of American justice and righteousness.

Rational troops on both sides would refuse to listen to a single order from the officer corps. Infantrymen cannot win in war; they can only hope to survive. Of course, troops ignoring a direct order would be dealt with by troops willing to obey their officer. Consider a scenario where no infantrymen will take an order, acting in solidarity. Then an officer is one man with a gun, against many others with guns. Human psychology rarely embraces this survivalist mentality. Surrender occurs, but it is more often complicit with an officer's orders. Armies really do run on a mixture of fear, respect, nationalism, and righteousness (whether real or perceived). There are righteous wars; the Allied forces in World War II are as close to righteous as a war machine can be. Still, a righteous army uses motivational maxims, such as George Patton's speech to Third Army preceding D-Day:

> "Americans love a winner. Americans will not tolerate a loser. Americans despise cowards. Americans play to win all of the time. I wouldn't give a hoot in hell for a man who lost and laughed. That's why Americans have never lost nor will ever lose a war; for the very idea of losing is hateful to an American."

Those troops cannot go home hanging their heads – they can either succeed or die trying. Patton evokes 'American' six times, not 'men'. He separates what 'American's will do – win – from what they will not stand for - 'loser's, 'cowards.' The last line is especially interesting; the very notion of abandoning a mission or anything less than complete commitment to the war is 'hateful.'

Mireau uses the same language: "Ready to kill more Germans?" Mireau's discovery of a "coward" in the trench could be a reference to an incident that almost ruined Patton's career. Patton made some rounds through a field hospital during his Italian campaign and found a soldier who was suffering from shock. The general called him a coward and slapped him. The incident reached the press and Eisenhower was nearly forced to remove Patton from service, he was furloughed instead.

Maltreatment was rampant in the trenches of World War I, where the general staff was more isolated from the mood of the front compared to World War II. The physical and psychological toll of defending the front broke many infantrymen. Outside of their concerns in the war, they had families to worry about and the French government did little to support their dependents. The French army suffered "mutinies," somewhat of a misnomer considering the revolts almost never resulted in violence toward the officer corps. Such strikes usually occurred when a division was ordered to the front, the

infantrymen would refuse to return from leave, calling for better conditions, supplies, and support for their households. For the most part, lower ranking officers empathized with their men's concerns – drastically reducing the number of executions demanded by the frustrated generals. All told, 49[2] French regulars were executed for abandoning their post – almost all considered troublemakers for stirring up their fellow soldiers to demand better treatment. 554 were sentenced to die, but most executions were commuted in favor of prison sentences lasting 20 or more years. Many of these men were killed or imprisoned for defending welfare of the home front – the very reason they went to war.

In *Paths of Glory*, Kubrick questions the rationality of modern war. World War I was not a sensible war, political forces in both Germany and France motivated the countries to battle. The purpose of such a war is not to defend the homeland, but to trade a small slice of land for millions of lives. Victory earns no reward for the men of the frontline, only fleeting glory for the leaders who herded them to No Man's Land, to their deaths. For Kubrick, war strips a soldier of his humanity. He has none of the freedom of thought or expression that define him as a man. A man at war is a sheep; he can only hope to have a good shepherd.

Kubrick closes the film with the weary sheep gathered in a café. A terrified German girl (Christianne Kubrick, the director's wife) sings "The Faithful Hussar." A loose English translation goes:

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[2] Smith, Leonard V. Between Mutiny and Obedience : The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994. 183, 213.

A faithful soldier, without fear,
He loved his girl for one whole year,
For one whole year and longer yet,
His love for her, he'd ne'er forget.

This youth to foreign land did roam,
While his true love, fell ill at home.
Sick unto death, she no one heard.
Three days and nights she spoke no word.

And when the youth received the news,
That his dear love, her life may lose,
He left his place and all he had,
To see his love, went this young lad...

He took her in his arms to hold,
She was not warm, forever cold.
Oh quick, oh quick, bring light to me,
Else my love dies, no one will see...

Pallbearers we need two times three,
Six farmhands they are so heavy.
It must be six of soldiers brave,
To carry my love to her grave.

A long black coat, I must now wear.
A sorrow great, is what I bear.
A sorrow great and so much more,
My grief it will end nevermore.[3]

Each voice that joins the singer on stage brings more exasperation at the state of affairs. The men have been forced to watch three of their own face French bullets for a crime they committed together. The situation hangs heavy upon their blessed heads, lucky they were not drawn into the execution by lot, or a vengeful officer. Their thoughts drift home, to their wives, children, and mothers – everything gentle and good in their world. Communication hadn't reached its zenith in World War I, the men in the café had little

[3] Dirks, Tim. "Paths of Glory." AMC Filmsite. American Movie Channel. 20 April 2011. < http://www.filmsite.org/path3.html>

concept of what transpired at home. The human toll was not limited to the men in the trenches; the whole country makes sacrifices when at war – for some, the ultimate sacrifice. The battered men did not know if they would make it back; they did not know what would be waiting if they survived.

Through the parting café scene, Kubrick closes the story on a micro note, the individual tragedy of war. He began the film on a macro view, literally calling the troops' objective an Anthill, large, distant and alive with tiny industrious Germans fortifying their turf. The sense of hopelessness in war is multiplied: each Frenchmen, every German weeps alone for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. *Paths of Glory* is a very ironic title; there is no glory for any of the millions at war.

Chapter II: *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb*

KUBRICK'S interest in nuclear war began as sheer curiosity. He approached the issue as a concerned citizen, with no ambition to make a film on the subject. The director's research led him to an extraordinarily complex understanding of the technical systems the United States employed to deter the perceived Soviet menace. The fascination spanned from the intricate details of surface-to-air communication, to the broad, hypothetical science of nuclear strategy. Kubrick subscribed to dozens of obscure military journals and trade papers. In an essay he eponymously titled "How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Cinema," Kubrick wrote that his personal study turned into a film when he realized "there's absolutely no chance for people to learn anything from [nuclear war]. So it seemed to me that this was eminently a problem, a topic to be dealt with dramatically" (Kubrick, 12).

Through his research, Kubrick came upon Peter George's novel, *Red Alert* (1958), and secured the screen rights. Enlisting the help of Terry Southern, a rising American satirist, Kubrick reworked a conventional political drama into the celebrated black comedy, *Dr. Strangelove*. Deranged General Jack Ripper (Sterling Hayden) exploits a loophole in the American chain of command to launch an attack wing of B-52 bombers into Russian airspace. Ripper locks down his airfield and orders his men to attack anything that attempts to breach the perimeter. Unable to recall the bombers, the President (Peter Sellers) and his chief military advisors gather in the war room to decide their next move. Ripper's superior, Gen. Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) encourages the President to order a comprehensive offensive nuclear attack to completely wipe out

the USSR before it can mount a significant counterattack. An Army attachment eventually breaches Burpelson Air Force Base, only to find Ripper dead of a self-inflicted gunshot. Ripper's executive officer, Lionel Mandrake (Peter Sellers), locates the planes' recall codes and the attack is halted, with the exception of Major Kong's (Slim Pickens) plane whose radio was damaged en route to its Russian target. In the novel, the last remaining bomber is downed at the very last moment by Russian air defense, averting the entire crisis. Kubrick saves no such salvation for the characters of *Dr. Strangelove*, for the bomber completes its run, setting off the Russian doomsday device and destroying all life on earth.

The nuclear problem added apocalypse to the already gruesome repertoire of violent acts mankind could perpetrate against itself. *Dr. Strangelove* is obviously specific to the Cold War, but the personalities on screen caricature attitudes universal to all wars. Machismo has always played into war in certain contexts, and sex along with it. Samson, the undefeated warrior of the Hebrews, was finally captured after he slept with Delilah, leaving his legendary hair vulnerable. Armies do not always rely on sheer numbers to decide victory; sometimes the spoils go to the bigger, stronger, more daring side. For Kubrick, man's "weapons (as in *Strangelove*) are really symbolic projections of his own sexual parts" (Carringer, 45). When in past decades such sexual frustrations might have resulted in the use of excessive firepower or illegal executions of prisoners, the Cold War significantly upped the ante.

"*MAN'S IDEA OF A MOVIE HERO: And the women agree! 6 feet 4 inches!*"

Virility is a staple of the mythic American man. He's tall, strong, and tough – like John Wayne – a man's man, a "*POPULAR, HANDSOME HOLLYWOOD STAR*." A man who sleeps with many women is celebrated as a stud, Lothario or Don Juan, but his female counterpart is a harlot. Ad agencies have used the image of the strapping, brave, chiseled American man to sell everything from hair gel to Cadillac coupes. Frankly, there is very little sex appeal in accounting, driving a delivery truck, or selling office supplies – Average Joes puff up their masculinity through the acquisition of these mystical products, endorsed by their gods and heroes.

For some, a tub of pomade and a V-8 are enough – they buy their way into a notion of success. However, some men have a deeper-seated desire to emulate their heroes. They are not content with a stream of consumer solutions or upgrades to their current lifestyle – they need replication. Getting into the hero business is no easy feat. Cowboys are all but defunct. Success in athletics depends heavily on genetics and talent.

Crime fighters are increasingly replaced by surveillance systems. The last refuge of the budding American hero is the recruiting station - the ladies love a man in uniform.

Without the budget to seek adventure as globetrotting travelers, young men routinely turn to the military as an outlet for mythic aspirations. In exchange for a few prime years, the would-be American hero is afforded the opportunity to fly planes, pilot ships, shoot guns, and earn satisfaction as one of the few righteous defenders of the free world. Some leverage their service to gain a college education, those with a strong aptitude for military life may find themselves asked to lead others. True fanatics advance through the ranks and are put in charge of critical defense systems, trusted with the weightiest of responsibilities – the coastline, the borders, the domestic nuclear arsenal.

The plot of Kubrick's Cold War nightmare comedy is predicated on a few such fanatics. The characters deciding the fate of life on earth have earned their rank less by merit of rational thought than self-selection. Those who ardently embrace the American myth usually wind up in the military hierarchy; generals are more likely war hawks than peaceful doves. Within the military establishment, even fewer can distinguish themselves as worthy of a station in the Strategic Air Command. Strategic Air Command, often abbreviated SAC, was the brainchild of Lieutenant General Curtis LeMay. LeMay can be credited with establishing the multilayered American nuclear arsenal: pressing for the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, in-air refueling capabilities and jet-propelled bombers. The general was known for clashing with his superiors, he unsuccessfully attempted to convince President Kennedy to begin a bombing campaign against Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis. SAC was never known as a pensive or

even-tempered organization, needing to be reined in by the Secretary of Defense and the President. In SAC, the most zealous of true believers are granted command of an attack wing, with the autonomy to launch an irrevocable attack on Russia. The embodiment of a man striving for American virility is Gen. Jack Ripper and *Dr. Strangelove* features no shortage of fellow red-blooded aspirants.

Buck Turgidson is more than simply a silly name: "his first name is slang for a virile male and his last name suggests both bombast and an adjective meaning "swollen"" (Maland, 704-705). The actual SAC commander at the time of *Dr. Strangelove*'s production was actually called Thomas S. Power, no doubt inspiring the epitaphs of a few of Kubrick's characters. Gen. Jack Ripper recalls Jack the Ripper, London's infamous sex murderer; Ambassador De Sadesky evokes the Marquis De Sade – indeed all the characters have sexually suggestive names. Kubrick is drawing a relationship between sex and aggression. The director even has the characters matched accurately to their names, in terms of the severity of their sexual depravity. Ripper is the worst: serial murderer and rapist known for violently mutilating his victims' bodies, loony enough to launch an unprovoked nuclear strike. Kong is likely second: really a harmless creature unless freed from his cage (American airspace). Turgidson comes in third – "Bucky" keeps his blood thirst in check through frequent romps with his secretary. Sadesky, Kissov and Strangelove are seemingly more rational. Whether Strangelove's insistence on a 10:1 women to men ratio in the proposed mine shelter is scientifically necessary or simply predatory is unknown. Kissov isn't exactly innocent either; Ambassador Sadesky implies the premier cannot be reached at his office because he enjoys the company of

local women. Muffley and Mandrake both fall at the bottom of the scale, actually lacking the masculine energy to stop their oversexed counterparts before Kong delivers his payload. Alternatively, the President and the Colonel are not feminine enough to neutralize the generals' chauvinism. Ripper's strange fascination with fluoridation and the sapping of "precious bodily fluids" demonstrates a maniacal obsession with male potency. Testosterone destroys the world. Dr. Strangelove reassures the audience that the same pigheadedness will survive doomsday – the men cowering at the bottom of the hypothetical mineshafts are the same fools who caused the attack.

Design imitates life – the machines in *Dr. Strangelove* mimic the sexual energy their human operators exemplify. Technology has always been the backbone of American supremacy; in *Dr. Strangelove*, technology represents a slightly different area of the human anatomy. The film's opening credits roll over a B-52 docking with an airborne refueling plane. The smaller bomber mates with the plane, gracefully dancing in the sky "while the sound track plays a popular love song, "Try A Little Tenderness"" (Maland, 704). Kubrick finds a phallic tendency in almost every dimension of military design. The same corner of the mind that motivates men over forty to purchase sports cars and seek pharmaceutical assistance for their love life also drives nations to build bigger, more complex, deadlier weapons.

As industry grew in the United States throughout the 20th century, the younger country successfully siphoned off much of the intellectual talent from Europe, particularly leading up to and during World War II. The new American brain trust assured years of sustained technical innovation. An unbridled desire to push the envelope

took on a whole new meaning when the USSR announced it launched the first satellite, Sputnik, in 1957. Russian Yuri Gagarin was the first man in orbit in 1961, followed by John Glenn for the Americans in 1962. President Kennedy formally announced the space program's moon objective in May of 1962. While the US lagged in the space race, hysteric weapon stockpiling placed the Americans squarely ahead in nuclear armament size. The same year Kennedy said "we choose the moon," the US built out its nuclear arsenal to a staggering 27,000 warheads – eight times the number the USSR kept.[4] As Kubrick assembled the production of *Dr. Strangelove*, the United States' all out commitment to technological (and warhead) superiority reached its peak.

In *Dr. Strangelove*, technology can be broadly divided into two discrete systems: weaponry and communication. Kubrick's black humor leverages the divide: weaponry works all the time, communication only works in the service of weaponry. Gen. Ripper's telephone works perfectly to call Capt. Lionel Mandrake with instructions to issue attack plan R. Ripper's orders come over the CRM-114 seamlessly and are confirmed with the base via radio. Strategic Air Command monitoring the nuclear arsenal flags the rogue command and tries to reach Ripper or anyone at Burpelson Air Force Base. Finding all attempts at communication fruitless, a notice finally reaches Gen. Buck Turgidson, only to be held up by the general's secretary and his preoccupation in the powder room.

Issuing an order for world annihilation works without a hitch, but recalling such a heady command is nary impossible. Gen. Ripper kills himself, leaving Mandrake to explain the situation to the skeptical Col. Bat Guano (Keenan Wynn) and transmit the

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[4] Natural Resources Defense Council, Archive of Nuclear Data 1945-2002, http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab9.asp

special prefix and recall codes to SAC. Mandrake picks up the red phone to call SAC, but the line is dead; he picks up another receiver lying on Ripper's desk, however the cord is mangled from the firefight. Mandrake makes a final attempt from a payphone, but has not the pocket change to pay the operator, nor will the Pentagon accept his collect call. Confounded, he persuades Guano to shoot a Coco-Cola vending machine to extract some change. At last the recall codes are issued, all the planes begin their retreat or were destroyed with the exception of Kong's, whose radio was destroyed by a Russian missile. The contrived problems with phones and radios parody an American desire for a simple good v. evil dynamic; it is easier to blindly fear the Russians than participate in a dialogue where two powers can contribute to, without dominating, the world.

Gen. Ripper is emblematic of the communication problem satirized in *Dr. Strangelove*, he is an intractable anti-communist in every sense and inexplicably fears the fluoridation of public water. Ironically, the government's lack of communication about its fluoridation program – improving dental health, synonymous with vitality – compels Ripper to start nuclear war, a real menace the American public has thoroughly considered and dismissed. Ripper passed a Human Reliability Test to join SAC: he must be an incredibly skilled, perceptive liar (unlikely) or the types of answers sought to insure 'reliability' are perfunctory and commonsensical.

Where Ripper is homicidally introverted, the political forces at play are able to communicate successfully. Pres. Muffley and Premier Kissov eventually form a strange understanding through their trial; at one point apologizing to one another so profusely that they argue over whose apology is more sincere. In the conversation between the two

leaders, there is profound honesty (though Kissov is drunk) and respect, opposite the unfettered fear and hate festering in Ripper. Communication prevails: the leaders of the US and USSR realize they are not that different, but hope is dashed minutes later with Kong's last bull ride and the doomsday machine's activation. Muffley and Kissov's dynamic negates Ripper's comment about "war being too important to be left to the politicians," an inversion of George Clemenceau's original quote: "war is too important to be left to the generals." In *Dr. Strangelove*, Kubrick exposes the fragile equilibrium between adversarial, antithetical superpowers maintained by commanders of ambiguous character communicating through discriminating technology.

Humankind is truly playing with fire, creating a technology to kill billions and leaving it in the hands of the least trustworthy – ordinary people. Ripper executes the attack, Turgidson's system is unable to recall the bombs, and Premier Kissov failed to announce the existence of the doomsday device when it was completed. The human element has destroyed the world, "portraying [General Ripper] willing to obliterate the world because of fluoridation, Kubrick lays bare the irrational American fear of communism as one source of the cultural malaise of the early 1960's" (Maland, 706).

Dr. Strangelove's status as a nightmare-comedy came about only after Kubrick realized he could not make the film as a drama – the premise was simply too ludicrous to play straight. Consider two superpowers with fingers hovering over hair triggers, waiting to annihilate the enemy, themselves and the world - Kubrick "realized that nuclear war was too outrageous, too fantastic to be treated in any conventional manner" (Baxter, 176). Kubrick's iconoclasm is directed at two tenets of the post-war period: "the structure of

American society was basically sound, and that Communism was a clear danger to the survival of the United States and its allies" (Maland, 698).

The first premise is completely undone by a multitude of truths: America was not (and still is not) the middle-class white suburban utopia popularized by 50's advertisements, a majority of the population (women, racial minorities) was marginalized politically, economically and culturally, and young people were abandoning their parents' Judeo-Christian morals in droves. Kubrick sees these inadequacies and satirizes accordingly – Kong's B-52 crew is "in the tradition of Hollywood war movies celebrating America as a melting pot, … a classic cross section of American male society" (Rasmussen, 10). When Major Kong delivers an extemporaneous motivational, he assures awards and merits will be issued "regardless of your race, color or your creed." America has a complex nuclear strategy for eradication of the Russians and preservation of freedom, but African-Americans still cannot vote, go to quality schools or patronize certain businesses in some cities.

The cast of character in *Dr. Strangelove* noticeably lacks a civilian presence. Kubrick's nuclear drama is strictly the province of military men and a few politicians with the authority to command them. By removing civilian life visually, the millions of lives gambled become mere poker chips, as the saying goes – you win some, you lose some. Kubrick imagines a government that no longer acts in the best interest of its people; where mass genocide of Americans is an acceptable level of collateral damage, as long as the Russians are completely wiped from the map. Throughout history, governments had the power to send fighting men to war. In the nuclear age, governments

significantly expanded the scope of war. When missiles and jet bombers can flatten a country at a moment's notice, the whole civilian populace finds itself on the field of battle. The US and USSR nuclear programs were never put to a vote, the civilian populace was never consulted, yet suddenly the crosshairs steadied on the nuclear (see: traditional) family. Kubrick keeps the action in the War Room, and in doing so abstracts the complex dance between the military, president, diplomats and Russians. Both parties are suspended in a vacuum; they do not lose sleep over civilian concerns. Likewise the happy, productive, middle-class American life goes on unfettered. In the most literal and objective sense, *Dr. Strangelove* is an important film simply for warning the public against the divide between the average American's wellbeing and the government's nuclear policy.

The only real danger from communism was the fear it instilled in the American people. Americans built an atomic bomb, so the USSR matched, the pattern continues inevitably with the hydrogen bomb, ICBMs, a doomsday device, concluding only with Turgidson's outburst, "Mr. President, we must not allow a mineshaft gap!" *Dr. Strangelove*'s central and most devastating joke is not aimed at the establishment or military, but at the American public who go about their ordinary lives when their democratically elected government designs a standoff that will obliterate everything they hold dear. History ultimately unmasked communism as an inefficient, at times cruel, form of government – still, life as a socialist is probably preferable to vaporization or protracted illness from radiation exposure. Americans had much more to fear from their

own government's response to Cold War tensions than even the most dastardly, insidious communist infiltrations into American life.

Chapter III: *Full Metal Jacket*

SEVEN years after *The Shining* (1980), Kubrick delivered *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Originally, the director sought material for a film on The Holocaust, but when he was introduced to Gustav Hasford's *The Short Timers* (1979) by collaborator Michael Herr, his focus shifted to Vietnam. *Full Metal Jacket* chronicles the fortunes of Private Joker (Matthew Modine). The film opens on basic training for the United States Marine Corps on Parris Island, South Carolina. Leaving American shores, Joker finds himself cast as a war correspondent for Stars and Stripes, an armed forces publication produced by the American military. When the going gets tough, Joker abandons his camera for a rifle. In an assault on the industrial city of Hue, Joker and his fellow Marines suffer heavy losses from a skilled sniper. Joker emerges physically intact, but Kubrick challenges the audience to question the humanity and efficacy of modern American war.

Rejoining a friend from basic training midway through the film, Private Joker drawls "Listen up, pilgrims" – the phrase, delivered through a wide grin with thumbs hooked through his belt loops, announces the death knell of the John Wayne's Western heroism by aping his memorable quip from John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962). In the combat zone, Joker begins to answer a rhetorical question he poses in the beginning of the film. Standing at attention for Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey), Joker asks aloud, "Are you John Wayne? Is this me?" So begins a search for American identity in two "worlds of shit" – a baptism in profanity, repetition and Marine brotherhood on Parris Island followed by a hero's wanderings in the wilderness of Vietnam.

With *Full Metal Jacket*, Kubrick assails American ambivalence to a futile war and the culture that produced the volunteer killers of the United States Marine Corps. Hollywood is as much to blame for America's appetite for violence. John Wayne made a career of shooting his way through countless hordes of Native Americans (*Stagecoach*), Japanese (*Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949)), Germans (*The Longest Day* (1961)) and even Vietnamese (*The Green Berets* (1968)). He shot a few Americans too, but they were bad guys. The Vietnam generation was also the first Television generation – Joker and Cowboy (Arliss Howard) bathed in the blue light of The Lone Ranger as tykes before taking up rifles as Marines. White American culture celebrates such violence as an affirmation of a certain God-granted right to peaceful, middle class civilization. These gunslingers and devil dogs do a lot of unsavory things in the name of family, prosperity and the American way.

The Western's simple good vs. evil scheme resonated through the 1950s; the recent defeat of fascism and fervent posturing against the communist menace perpetuated the need for classic American heroes. Vietnam represented a paradigm shift in the American public's taste for military involvement abroad. The age of conventional wars against clearly delineated enemies was over, Rafter Man (Kevyn Major Howard) laments, "We're supposed to be helping [the Vietnamese] and they shit all over us." The line recalls the common conflict for Native Americans in Western films: life usually is not too cushy on the white man's reservation. The same is true for the Vietnamese trying to survive unmolested by encroaching Americans.

Kubrick's references to John Ford's filmography are both thematic and technical. In a long take of the Marines outside Hue, Kubrick inserts a camera crew into the film and tracks from right to left, as opposed to the familiar left to right. Western directors regularly used the right to left tracking to suggest further movement into West and wilderness. Kubrick does not merely insert the shot, but cuts between a tracking shot of the camera crew shooting it and the Marines crouched before them. With the camera crew inserted, the audience is made aware of the self-conscious nature of film; Kubrick invokes the Western camera move and adds it to the broader vocabulary of gunslinger references he has imbued in *Full Metal Jacket*. During the tracking shot, one of the anonymous soldiers calls out, "We'll let the gooks play the Indians!" Indeed, Cowboy claims "This is Vietnam – The Movie," and every member of the squad has his role "Joker, of course, will play John Wayne; T.H.E. Rock will be Ann-Margret; Animal Mother, a rabid buffalo; Crazy Earl, General Custer" (Willoquet-Maricondi, 11). No doubt, the faceless VC and non-combatant natives offer plenty of "guilt-free cowboy-and-Indian play" for deranged American violence, as exampled by the gunner aboard the helicopter that delivers Joker and Rafter Man "into the shit" (Doherty, 28).

Whether hiking along a canal or approaching the industrial Hue, Vietnam appears worthy as wilderness for young American adventuring. The jungles and people may bear no resemblance to the dusty valleys of the American West – Vietnam is the newest frontier and consequently a "landscape for American projections" (Doherty, 28). The frontiersman of Vietnam pines for the familiarity of his old stomping grounds, as Pvt. Cowboy moans "I hate Vietnam. There's not one horse in this whole country. There's not

one horse in Vietnam. There's something basically wrong with that." For Cowboy, Vietnam holds all the dangers and adventure of the Wild West, and it certainly ought to have all the accoutrements thrown in for good measure.

By the late 1980s, the sun was already long set on the straight-shooting leading men of the Western genre's golden age, yet lived on in America's consciousness as the fantasy of an ethically binary world. In Wayne's world, the American man is encircled by the hostility of his surroundings and inhospitality of the native people. The hero does not hesitate to mount his horse, grab his rifle and six-gun to defend the homestead from some Comanche on the warpath. Beset on all sides by such dangers, the John Waynes of the Western genre are white knights; doing the only thing they know, clearing the darkness away for the more mild, innocent elements of American society. Joker and the Marines of *Full Metal Jacket* have the guns, a new type of horse and a wilderness to contend with; however their hero's journey is markedly darker and more perverse than Wayne's.

This journey begins on Parris Island, as the Corps prepares more sheep for slaughter. First, the enlistees are shorn of their wool in an almost cringe-inducing opening scene, returned to the bareheaded-ness of childhood. For Sgt. Hartman's purposes, the enlistees are children – puerile imbeciles dressed in white underwear that need instruction to differentiate right from left. Throughout the boys' training, Private Pyle (Vincent D'Onofrio) struggles to keep up physically and adhere to the strict rules, which dictate minute details of appearance and cleanliness. As punishment, Pyle is made to idly suck his thumb while his fellow enlistees march, pushup and squat thrust to exhaustion. Pyle's

need for remediation prompts his relationship with the quick witted, competent Joker, intertwining their fates on Parris Island.

When the sergeant is not treating the men like preschoolers, Hartman's barracks also evokes some sense of Catholicism. Every enlistee must pass the test of Parris Island to become part of an everlasting brotherhood of Marines. Marines are Marines even after their active duty; according to Hartman, Marines also "die. That's what we're here for. But the Marine Corps lives forever and that means you live forever." Every Marine gets his own name in the Church of the Holy Corps, recalling a Christian or confirmed name – it distinguishes its bearer from the heathens (the enemy) of the wild. Hartman dispatches these names with regular, red-blooded American gusto: "Texas? Only steers and queers come from Texas, Private Cowboy!"

Hartman's brand of religion is somewhat muddled, containing much reverence for the Virgin Mary. He insists the Head must be clean enough that the holy mother would not mind utilizing it. The Sergeant also asks Joker if he loves the Virgin, reprimands him for disagreeing, then promotes Joker to squad leader for his "guts." The enlistees may "give [their] heart to Jesus, but [their] ass belongs to the Corps." The Corps also uses religion to affirm America's position in the Cold War. On Christmas, Hartman introduces Chaplin Charlie who "will tell you about how the free world will conquer communism with the aid of God and a few Marines." Indeed, even Hartman's vestments convey some sort of priestly status; the gunnery sergeant contrasts with the plain white of the enlistees in his full uniform and wide-brimmed hat suggesting the *cappello romano* worn by Catholic clerics when outdoors. Boys in training pray to their rifles as they would the

cross, each stanza belted out with faith-filled zeal. As the training progresses, individuals lose personal importance in favor of the Corps. In one way, the barracks beating of Private Pyle could be seen as a self-flagellation for sins committed against the orderliness and strictures imposed by Hartman.

Parris Island is a "world of shit" because Marines strive for absolute perfection in every movement of their hands and feet, the way they breath, eat, drink – to be anything less than model is to sin against the Corps. When the squad falters in any way, the entire body of the Corps must perform penance doled out in miles of dogged jogging or pushups. The impossible standard of the Corps is the same as the sinless nature of Christ – the best Marines can only try to emulate, none can succeed.

Ultimately, Pyle eviscerates Hartman, then himself – fulfilling their roles as Marines: to die. Pyle is a heretic. He worships the rifle above the Gunny and his fellow Marines, prompting the murder-suicide. Kubrick fades from Pyle's brain tissues splayed on the bathroom tile to a sunny street in Vietnam. With Hartman's murder and Pyle's suicide, Joker completes his final rites before entering the wilderness – to face a loaded gun and see a man die.

Off of Parris Island, Kubrick is free to indulge his ironic sensibility, exposing Wayne and Ford's world as one of senseless violence against an indigenous populace. In *Full Metal Jacket*'s first scene in Vietnam, a prostitute waltzes up the main street to advertise her services to the intrigued Joker and Rafter Man. She is the first of three women who appear in the entirety of *Full Metal Jacket*, the second is also a prostitute, the last a sniper. In the allegorical vocabulary of the American Western, women represent the

home, something to fight for, a moral center earned through a taxing life at the edge of civilization. John Ford's seminal *The Searchers* (1956) opens with a woman confined to her island of domesticity in the midst of the vast wilderness. Sheltered from the hazards beyond her front door, Martha Edwards (Dorothy Jordan) is dour and maternal next to the sexual object on display in *Full Metal Jacket*. Kubrick's women prance on screen, proposition a few johns, make their exchange and disappear with their earnings – they are not sweeping trail dirt out of every crevice of their hovel and preparing three meals a day from scratch.

Dressed in scraps of clothing and strutting to Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots," the image of the Vietnamese prostitute contrasts strongly even against a fellow prostitute in Ford's *Stagecoach*. In *Stagecoach*, the noble courtesan, Dallas (Claire Trevor), helps deliver a child, fight off Geronimo's charge, and attracts the affections of the Ringo Kid (John Wayne). Though a prostitute, Dallas is white. In Ford's world this counts for something, as Martin Pawley's (Jeffrey Hunter) Indian wife, Look, does not earn such favorable treatment in *The Searchers*. Look (Beulah Archuletta) is spurned by Martin, kicked down a dune and shooed away from Ethan and Martin's camp, much to Ethan's amusement. Prostitutes in Kubrick's film are sirens; arriving as transitions to move from scene to scene and are generally of a very low order. Their interest in Joker and the Marines is purely financial. As characters, they are completely one dimensional, other than a racial gag concerning Eightball (Dorian Harewood), who might be too "beaucoup." Eightball's wealth of masculinity is threatening to the prostitute. Ironically, he will be the first struck by the female sniper.

The overall lack of women in *Full Metal Jacket* confirms Kubrick's Vietnam is not a place to be settled, only a new frontier that panders to the quick-handed American killers who landed on its shores seeking good sport.. Doc Jay (John Stafford) and Animal Mother (Adam Baldwin) both make attempts to rescue Eightball, but their heroics are not rewarded. Doc Jay is also felled and Animal Mother's well-intentioned insubordination results in Cowboy's death. The squad of trained killers is toyed like a ball of yarn; their fallen comrades serve as bait for the sniper's game. At a key moment in John Ford's *Stagecoach*, the Ringo Kid leaps from the coach onto the horses amid a whirlwind of bullets and spears to retrieve the reins and survives unscathed. The fantastical invulnerability of Western heroes is transposed with the cold, precise squeeze of the sniper's trigger finger in *Full Metal Jacket*.

Joker sneaks up on the sniper, but his rifle jams as he pulls the trigger to avenge his fallen Marines. The one on one encounter between the two echoes the final raid on the Comanche camp in *The Searchers*, Ethan searches out his long lost niece, Debbie Edwards (Natalie Wood), intent on killing her, sparing her continued existence as a savage. As Ethan lifts Debbie in a moment of violence, it becomes a moment of tenderness as family reunites.

Kubrick dresses the sniper in the same long pigtails, and she wears a scarf around her neck. Even the characters' positioning in the room is matched; Debbie is centered to the left of a tent flap and to the right of a hanging quilt. The sniper is likewise centered, right of a window and left of a wooden room divider.

Natalie Wood as Debbie Edwards in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956)

Ngoc Le as the VC Sniper in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)

Kubrick then turns Ford's work on its axis. Rafter Man arrives just in time to save Joker, rounds erupt all over the sniper's torso and she collapses, inert. As she gasps, Animal Mother arrives and adamantly insists she be left to the rats. Joker refuses his solution, draws his sidearm and pumps a bullet in the sniper's skull. Joker commits the act of mercy Ethan was trying to perform. For Joker, it is the final sacrament. He is fully ordained in the Corps, still in a "world of shit." In the end "Joker […] has become John Wayne, solving his own schizoid riddle" (Pursell, 322).

That the sniper is a girl is no accident. She appears very young, a teenager. The sniper is not a battle-hardened veteran, she is dressed in plainclothes – she is murdering Marines in pigtails. The sniper first takes out the stereotypically well-endowed African American, Eightball. Kubrick is emasculating the virile American man, one rifle round at time, starting with the Marine who is well defined as a man. The remaining Marines open fire, using rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers and rocket launchers to blast indiscriminately at the buildings around their fallen comrade. Cowboy issues a ceasefire order. The sniper takes a second shot at Eightball, striking him in the upper arm – blatantly torturing him before finishing the homicide. The men blindly fire again till Cowboy quells them. Over the radio, Cowboy reports "possible strong enemy forces" block their path. The sniper pumps two more rounds into Eightball, one in the foot, the second in the groin. Doc Jay rushes to his aid, and is struck twice. Cowboy decides the squad will fall back, but Animal Mother refuses to leave the two fallen Marines. Disobeying a direct order, he charges over to the bullet-ridden men, swinging his belt-fed M60 automatic machine gun in front of him, screaming. Animal Mother's charge is an

obvious display of masculinity – the largest member of the squad, bearing his war face, and firing a big, death-dealing phallic symbol from his waist. His war cry is soon silenced by a burst of rounds slicing through Doc Jay. Animal Mother peers around the corner and a shot erupts in the wall next to him, forcing him back. He convinces the squad to join him – a move that proves fatal for Cowboy. The female sniper takes three men's lives. American virility, responsible for nuclear annihilation in *Dr. Strangelove*, is thoroughly rebuked in *Full Metal Jacket*.

At the end of *The Searchers*, the door that opened in the first shot is closed – with John Wayne left out in the wilderness. Similarly, Joker survives his ordeal in Hue, but is still in Vietnam. The remaining Marines hump their way out of town in the darkness. As fires rage through the bombed out concrete skeletons of Hue's city limits, the Americans raise a song – the theme of *The Mickey Mouse Club*. The song is the cherry on top. Kubrick has revealed Joker's true self, what the character aimed to accomplish. With "M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E," the soldiers honor their shared upbringing as the first television generation, drones doped by Mickey and later inspired by The Duke – John Wayne. The men belting out Mickey's anthem represent the corporate usurpation of children rearing. Parents of the Vietnam generation could trust the Walt Disney Company to entertain their children while they went to work and took care of the house chores. Mickey is the new American father, as iconic and all-powerful as Mao, Stalin or any other cult of personality. Mickey tells his audience what is good, bad, funny and sad. Children mature within his curriculum, seeking more adult content. Walt's plan for the American children has gone to plan, he created age-appropriate content for little ones,

elementary school, middle school, even high school – the high school graduates of Mickey's USA are the bare-headed psychopaths of Parris Island. The reference to Mickey Mouse returns the audience to the suburban living room floor where they once laid prone on the carpet in front of the television for immeasurable hours. The suburban, middle-class allusion deep in Vietnam connects to one of the few other explicit references to American soil, one of Joker's interview responses:

> I wanted to see exotic Vietnam, the jewel of Southeast Asia. I wanted to meet interesting and stimulating people of an ancient culture and kill them. I wanted to be the first kid on my block to get a confirmed kill!

Joker's ambitions in Vietnam – though somewhat ironic, come from his block, America, the suburbs – someplace familiar and safe.

In Vietnam: the Indians win, the women are all prostitutes, the horse is a helicopter, saving the day is suicide, and the heroes are all dead. *Full Metal Jacket* shows the absurdity of war in Vietnam and the genesis of the men who choose to go there. Vietnam is the frontier, the much-vaunted 'safety-valve' where American energies of entrepreneurship and violence converge. The country manifested its destiny, sticking its nose far beyond the scope of the Monroe Doctrine. Vietnam, nor Korea before it, held any particular strategic significance to domestic American safety – it was an opportunity to flex muscles in a very inhospitable place for a conventional Western war machine. The weight ultimately proved too heavy.

In the montage of interviews, Crazy Earl offers, "Does America belong in Vietnam? I don't know. I belong in Vietnam. I can tell you that." The Marines truly are

“jolly green giants walking the earth, with guns!” This is what post-war American prosperity has wrought, not a culture of peacefulness earned of horrible loss, but an irrational craving for more flag covered coffins. Joker closes the film with, “I am in a world of shit, but I am alive.” Vietnam is Joker’s new reality - he might as well sing along.

Conclusion

AMERICAN life thrives on myth. As a people, Americans "drastically underestimate the current level of wealth inequality, … hold overly optimistic beliefs about opportunities for social mobility in the United States, … more broadly, Americans exhibit a general disconnect between their attitudes toward economic inequality and their self-interest and public policy preferences" (Norton, 12). The country is convinced of fictions, which is not necessarily bad for the greater good of society. All the social striving leads people to work hard, to value their lives and those of their family; it encourages education and advancement. Americans are inherently competitive, pushing one another forward. However, Average Joes and Janes do not often find themselves in scenarios like Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* (1936). The population is composed more of Chaplin's Tramp than Welles' Kane. Society fails because it wants to be greater than it really is. Some films gleefully ignore this; they embrace the clichéd happy ending.

In this respect, Tinseltown is in part responsible for American optimism. On screen, people are capable of anything. The individual is powerful, capable of swaying world affairs and determining his or her own fortunes. Reality is rather different: lives have trajectories, the gross majority are completely ordinary. On this topic, Kubrick excels. Even in his high concept fare, people are simply people: capable, but predictable. Kubrick's protagonists are not particularly likeable, no more or less than his supporting characters; they are simply the center of the story. Kubrick's Americans, even the ones in the position of great power, are as culpable and imperfect as any real person. When the director does endow a character with superior intellect or ethical sense, as in Dax, the

character's idealism is futile. Kubrick does not favor redemption, the Hollywood ending. Ultimately, the myth looms too large. A few reasonable men are ineffective against political expediency, the American virility of the mythic zealots, and the thousand-yard trance of John Wayne.

Kubrick's parting shot at Disney in *Full Metal Jacket* is the culmination of a deep cynicism in the director's filmography. Mickey's America was a lie, one that started as an idealized form of the truth and had since grown ugly and distended. His oeuvre begins less pessimistic. *Paths of Glory* is a about a patriot, someone who believes in his country, due process and inalienable rights. Dax's resignation to return with his men to the front is a melancholic mood to end the film on, but he lives to fight another day.

America felt the same after World War I, maimed by its own losses, horrified as a witness to industrial-powered carnage. The Great War was also the United States' first major entrée into international dealings; it became a leader diplomatically and economically. War truly is hell, but of all the participants, America emerged at the top of the pile. Hope sprang eternal for the country, even through the darker days of World War II. Defeating the Nazis and rebuffing Japanese imperialism were more clear cut objectives, a matter of bringing justice to real evildoers for the former and protecting American soil for the latter. America ascended as the irrefutable capitalistic superpower.

From the end of the Second World War, the American Myth becomes more abstracted from the actual course of the country. The Japanese suffered the power of American progress, two cities laid to waste in seconds. With nuclear weapons, the lives at stake leaped from thousands to millions as the century wore on. The US and USSR must

share the blame for failing to respect one another's spheres of influence. They reinforced borders with warheads instead of sandbags (though, no concrete was spared for the Berlin Wall). Cooperation for mutual gain and global stability was spurned in favor of brinksmanship. The Arms Race exacerbated the problem, creating the hydrogen bomb, advanced tactical warheads, ICBMs, jet bombers, MIRVs, and massive proliferation. As witness to the exponential growth of Cold War tensions, Kubrick countered each development with more stinging subversion.

The scale of Kubrick's disillusionment with the American Myth grows with each film. *Paths of Glory* premiered in the nuclear age, but before the truly terrifying, imminent death-bringing missile systems that placed Armageddon on a launch button. *Dr. Strangelove* landed at the height of the buildup, a frighteningly plausible scenario masquerading as black comedy. The film shows that doomsday is seconds from midnight and the watchmaker is a sex-crazed technophile. While *Dr. Strangelove* portrays the mania of the nuclear-armed hierarchy, *Full Metal Jacket* is a (all too real) dystopia, told from the eyes of a grunt in the bush, engaged in a war no one seems to want. *Full Metal Jacket* came in 1987, after the US and USSR began to holster their respective pistols with SALT I and II. The nuclear problem continues to haunt the world, though the US and Russia have pledged to reduce their stockpiles. New countries continue to develop nuclear arsenals; these governments may act more cavalier with their capabilities than the Cold War powers. The loss of Kubrick in 1999 was a great tragedy. The next five years brought two new American wars, Kubrick's role as a teacher and critic would have been all the more prescient.

Kubrick pulls no punches. His work is rarely (if ever) cheerful; his endings are anything but naïve. *Paths of Glory* and *Full Metal Jacket* end with the main characters still in the warzone. *Dr. Strangelove* concludes on the end of the world. There is a sense of inevitability, helplessness. Humans designed these predicaments, but are unable to avert their fruition. Though men like Dax, Muffley, Mandrake and Joker persist, they are actually powerless against the momentum of their situation. Kubrick has often been charged with approaching his characters too coldly.[5] That accusation may be true, if the standard of emotional intimacy is based on mainstream Hollywood filmmakers. A more rationalist perspective would argue Kubrick is a great humanist; someone for who war was never entertainment. Central characters do not merit additional sympathy or care; for Kubrick, an emotional hierarchy would compromise the value of each individual human life. The characters killed on screen suffer senseless deaths – there is no glory in their passing. This tendency runs against the grain, the audience pines for heroes, even if they fall, Kubrick refuses to buy into such archetypes.

Kubrick's films are more essay than easy to consume. His faith in image compounds the problem for the general movie going public; he is parsimonious with words, yet depends on subtle references to color the story. Not only is Kubrick an auteur, but also an amateur, in the most traditional sense of the word – someone with expertise outside their primary field of work. His films were meticulously researched, to a degree that borders on obsessive. Kubrick really is a filmmaker's filmmaker, a fact that was often ignored until he reached old age. His films, while methodically studied in academic

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[5] Kael, Pauline. "Stanley Strangelove." The New Yorker. January (1972): pp 50-51

circles today, were often written off as convoluted or pretentious in their own time. Writing about Kubrick following the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Andrew Sarris, American ambassador of auteur theory, categorized the director under "Strained Seriousness" (Sarris, 195). History has overruled Sarris' midcareer performance review. In hindsight, Kubrick's oeuvre appears as one of the most obvious examples of true auteurism in American cinema. Today, his shoes are simply too large to fill. The relationship Kubrick enjoyed with Warner Brothers is an artifact of a bygone era in moviemaking. In the age of corporate Hollywood, where every film is expected to gross a profit, Kubrick's films would prove too highbrow for the budgets they required.

Stanley Kubrick is remembered as one of the twentieth century's greatest directors, and perhaps its most socially insightful. Kubrick penetrated through the American façade of righteous interventionism, binary opposition to Socialism, and Hollywood indoctrination. Kubrick was an auteur; his films bear his aesthetic and thematic fingerprints. He was an uncompromising technician - a perfectionist on set who ran takes dozens of times to get the desired result. He often made portraits of humanity that were unflattering, even grotesque. Kubrick confronted the American government and the individual American. He pointed out and subverted the American Myth, shook the country by the shoulders and brought attention to the incongruity between public pretense and authentic quandary. The American Myth persists, despite Kubrick's best efforts – it always will.

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